1: Cohen E-4,5 (1956-1965) 1967 MS14 Kanuri MS14

There is no doubt that the lawan can punish people for not recognizing his authority. It is this kind of knowledge that make people aware that they must be sensitive to customary demands made of them by a lawan which if not complied with could bring punitive actions from his use of authority. Let me illustrate this by summarizing an interesting case from field notes:

Bukar is a newcomer to Magumeri. He has been given some land by the lawan and when not farming plies his trade as a hat-maker, and mud house builder. Because he had no previous social ties in the village he has attached himself to the Arabic teacher of the primary school who is a highly respected religious practitioner. This attachment appeals to Bukar because of his strong personal fears of supernatural malevolence. The Arabic teacher gives Bukar a place in the social relations of the village, plus free charms and medicines for illness and bad luck. Bukar looks after the teacher's house, repairs it, cleans it up periodically, and watches it during the latter's absence.

On one of these occasions during the teacher's absence Bukar borrowed some matting from his mentor for use within his own compound. The lawan in whose house there was to be a naming ceremony needed some extra mats for temporary shelters. He sent a follower over to the Arab teacher's compound to borrow some of the extra mats that were stocked there. These were taken, and Bukar was asked what had become of the rest of the mats. Bukar answered that he had borrowed them and that he was in charge of watching the teacher's possessions during the latter's absence. He refused to produce the matting in his own compound and was brought to the lawan where his defiance was rewarded by the lawan telling him that unless he produced the extra matting so that they could be borrowed by the lawan, then he (Bukar) was no better than a common thief. Bukar still refused and the matter was dropped.

When the teacher returned, the lawan complained to him of the disobedience and lack of respect of his man, Bukar. The teacher said nothing, but instead of reprimanding Bukar sent him to fetch back the mats borrowed by the lawan (the ceremony was now over). In so doing he indicated his support of his client, Bukar, against his fellow upperclass member in the town, namely the lawan.

Several months later Bukar was involved in a case against a Fulani nomad herdsman whose cows had strayed into one of his farm plots and eaten his millet. The case came before the lawan who ruled that, although the Fulani had pulled a knife on Bukar (a serious offense requiring a fine), it was Bukar who had started the fight, and it was this act that had caused the cow to wander over Bukar's field and devour his as well as another man's crops, besides causing the argument which made the Fulani pull a knife. Bukar was then fined heavily for starting a fight, fined for the other man's crops, and given an extra fine of five shillings which was to be paid to the district head. Bukar reports that his crops were already eaten before the fight started and besides this he and everyone else knows that pulling a knife during a fight is a separate offense from the fight itself and must be treated as such in court, and the Fulani was not fined for this misdemeanor.

In discussing the matter Bukar's senior, the teacher, explained that lawan was angry at Bukar for his behavior over the mats and was adjudicating against him for this reason. When Bukar finally raised the money for the fine, he was told by the teacher to give the money to the lawan and to say that he, Bukar, was a small, insignificant, poor peasant. He was further instructed to tell the lawan that if there was any help that the lawan needed in house building, he (Bukar) would be pleased to offer his services. The teacher also cautioned Bukar about the future.

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If the lawan continued to adjudicate against him and gave him heavy fines, then he should request to take the case to a higher court. Thus the teacher wished his peasant-follower to make his peace with the lawan but if this were impossible, then higher authorities would be resorted to and the lawan's power bypassed. In other words the teacher felt that the political structure of the town should be respected but within limits.

Bukar's problem illustrates how a lawan can make reprisals when he feels that there has been some lack of recognition given to his authority by those under his administration. There are a large number of things in land matters, general disputes, ceremonials, divorces, default of bad debts, assault, housing, and commerce that come within his perview and intersect the lives of his people at a great many points and in many vulnerable ways. Therefore to thwart his authority and then remain within the orbit of his power without the possibility of reprisals would be impossible.

Recruitment to the office of the lawan is officially carried out by appointment from the emirate government at the capital. There is an official investiture ceremony at the capital, as in the nineteenth century, in which the lawan receives a turban from the Shehu of Bornu. In general there is a tendency, but only a tendency, for lawans to inherit the position. Thus one of the male heirs of the lawan takes over his household site and becomes the new lawan after his death. A male heir can be anyone in the male line of the lawan although sons seem to be favored. On the other hand many of the village areas have a history in which the office has gone to a number of men based on their particular relationship to the district head, the immediate superior of the lawan in the political hierarchy. Thus there is also a tendency for the lawan to be appointed from the ranks of the incumbent district head's followers so that the office also tends to shift from one agnatic descent group to another in relation to shifts in the person of the district head.

One other factor is important in the succession to a lawan's office. This has to do with the political allegiance of the lawan in the political hierarchy of Bornu emirate. If a lawan dies, or is dismissed, and he is not friendly to a new district head, then whether or not the district head attempts to replace him depends (a) on what are the lawan's political connections beyond that of his official superior, the district head, and (b) whether the new district head can procure the loyalty of the lawan and therefore enlist him into his own following. If a lawan has very powerful friends in the emirate, then the new district head could incur their wrath by getting the lawan out of office. A lawan is removed from his village area headship for a number of reasons although they can all be subsumed under three broad categories. First the political maneuverings of a district head who wishes to replace the lawan with his own followers. Secondly, excessive migration out of the village area, or complaints to higher officials by the peasants against the lawan, and thirdly, failure to raise enough taxes. These may, of course, be interrelated so that, for example, migration out of the village area would be spotted in the tax returns or by complaints resulting from the lawan's plan to cover up by taxing those who remain more than is bearable, thus bringing on complaints. However, if a lawan is responsive to his superiors, and does not mulct his peasants to the point of hardship, migration, and complaint, he has a fairly secure position in the Bornu political system.